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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 PRISTINA 000689

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DEPT FOR DRL, INL, AND EUR/SCE, NSC FOR BRAUN, USUN FOR DREW SCHUFLETOWSKI, USOSCE FOR STEVE STEGER

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/22/2016

TAGS: PGOV PREL KDEM UNMIK DPKO VI

SUBJECT: KOSOVO: COM URGES NORTHERN MAYORS TO STAY ENGAGED, AVOID EXTREMISM

Classified By: COM TINA S. KAIDANOW FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D).

¶1. (C) Summary: COM travelled to northern Kosovo August 18 to meet with the mayors of the three predominantly Serb municipalities and utilize press opportunities to convey the benefits of the decentralization process to Serb residents of the north. All three mayors were definitive in rejecting a status outcome that included independence of any kind for Kosovo, but the mayor of Zvecan was the least hardline of the group, implying if not saying outright that the decentralization agreement could help Serbs come to terms with a new governing framework. The mayors were uniformly appreciative of USG assistance projects now identified for implementation in all three municipalities, and agreed that it was important to keep the lines of communication to the international community open in the next weeks and months as the status process comes to a conclusion. End summary.

Mayors Reject Independence for Kosovo

¶2. (C) COM visited the three northern municipalities of Zvecan, Leposavic and Zubin Potok August 18, meeting with the mayor in each case and appearing before the Serb press in Zvecan. Meetings were cordial, and in each instance the mayor recognized and expressed gratitude for ongoing USOP/USAID assistance projects identified with the participation of municipal authorities. COM noted that the coming weeks and months would be critical ones as the status process reached its conclusion, and pointed to the importance of leadership on the part of municipal leaders to maintain stability and counter radical voices whose interests were not consonant with those of ordinary Serb residents. She urged that the mayors follow carefully the outcome of the status discussions and that they consider -- and publicize -- its benefits to Serbs throughout Kosovo. She also emphasized the need to maintain open lines of communication to KFOR, UNMIK and diplomatic missions in Kosovo as the situation evolved.

¶3. (C) All three mayors, but most emphatically those in Leposavic (Velimir Bojovic) and Zubin Potok (Slavisa Ristic), were categorical in their rejection of any form of independence outcome for Kosovo. Bojovic expressed no trust in Kosovo institutions and insisted that there was no

political goodwill on the part of the Albanian leadership, at one point lapsing into the pejorative "Shiptar" terminology when referring to Kosovar authorities. He backpedalled considerably, however, when discussing the relationship between the municipality and international community, averring that cooperation would "of course continue." Ristic in Zubin Potok echoed the same themes, maintaining that "more time needed to go by" to build trust between Albanians and Serbs in Kosovo and claiming that "Serbs would have to respond in some way to any independence outcome." COM noted to both that the international community was committed to an outcome that gave Serbs every opportunity for a secure and prosperous future in Kosovo, but that self-imposed isolation or violence could only jeopardize that prospect. She underscored the need to think carefully before acting in the wake of any status decisions, and pointed to the considerable resources the international community could bring to the largely poor, rural Serb community in the north as an outgrowth of the status process.

¶4. (C) Zvecan mayor Milovic was more restrained and reflective in his discussion with COM, listening to her description of the potential benefits the decentralization process would bring and commenting that "the outcome would be important for Serbs and the way they viewed the status decision." Milovic and the COM appeared together in front of the Serb press, with Milovic noting his appreciation of the USG assistance projects underway and emphasizing the importance of security to the Serb population of northern Kosovo. COM used the opportunity to speak about the decentralization process and its likely impact on Serb communities, which would be able to exercise local control over key aspects of daily life.

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Comment

¶5. (C) Speaking with northern mayors, but particularly the two most intransigent, offers little prospect that they will accede to any status outcome that leaves Kosovo outside of Serbia. They are guarded in their statements about what might follow an independence outcome, but clear that they will not stand in the way -- and may in fact encourage -- grass roots action to protest any such decision. The Zvecan mayor, though obviously more nuanced in his approach, would likely not be in a position to stand aside from collective Serb decision making in a post-status environment. It is increasingly important both to take our message on decentralization directly to the Serb community (in the north and south) and to continue a firm line with Serb leaders, emphasizing the potential consequences of rash or hasty action. We will expand our outreach efforts to the Serbs, drawing in other Contact Group representatives as well, to encourage them to weigh the benefits of decentralization against the serious negatives of partition and isolation.
End comment.

¶5. (U) U.S. Office Pristina clears this cable for release in its entirety to U.N. Special Envoy for Kosovo Martti Ahtisaari.

KAIDANOW